

Smoked fish catching on It's been an upstream swim, but Shuckman's perseverance spawned a growing business



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Some people talk with their hands. Lewis Shuckman talks with his whole upper body as he describes the transition his third-generation company has made from general neighborhood grocery at 16th and Kentucky streets to smokehouse at 30th and Main.

This exuberance makes him one of the most likable ambassadors for Kentucky agriculture.

His specialty makes him perhaps the most unlikely.

Shuckman smokes fish.

He smokes bass, paddlefish, trout and catfish to impart a smoky flavor, the way many people do ribs or pork shoulder. Most of the fish he smokes is from Kentucky; much of it grown by farmers seeking a way to earn a better living from their farms.

Only recently have fish and shrimp joined tobacco and thoroughbreds as part of Kentucky's agricultural picture, contributing at least \$5 million annually to the state's agricultural economy and helping more than 250 Kentucky farm families move away from tobacco as their main source of income.

Shuckman smokes hundreds of pounds of fish each week and sells caviar harvested from Cumberland Lake paddlefish. The paddlefish is a relative of sturgeon and is sometimes called spoonfish. Shuckman's operation base is the West End warehouse his father originally used to distribute meat, canned goods and frozen foods to restaurants and country clubs beginning in 1954.

Shuckman, diagnosed at 10 as dyslexic, struggled with



Lewis Shuckman packaged catfish to be smoked.

Photo by Michael Clevenger



Smoked paddlefish with a Kentucky-grown shrimp.

Photo by Michael Hayman



KENTUCKY
OF AGRICULTURE

conventional education at a variety of schools (including military school for a year) and learning programs until he finally graduated from Waggener High School in 1972.

But the family business was easy for him. He started working part time when he was 12. His natural enthusiasm made him perfect for sales, and he was on the road by the time he was 17, becoming familiar with the back doors of restaurant kitchens.

For a while, he smoked sausage. The company sold many different kinds, but one in particular was so popular they couldn't keep up with demand. Finally, Shuckman contracted with a Cincinnati company to make "Shuckman's Old Louisville Sausage." Soon, Shuckman signed a noncompete clause and sold them the sausage recipe.

He was out of the smoked sausage business.

But the smoked fish business was about to get a big boost

Since 1983, he had bought trout from an aquaculture venture near Elizabethtown. Aquaculture as an industry in Kentucky was basically nonexistent then, said Angela Caporelli, a specialist with the Kentucky Department of Agriculture. Farmers grew fish to stock lakes for fishing and sell to people such as Shuckman. On the whole, the activity couldn't be picked up on radar.

The Shuckmans bought whole trout, trucked them up Interstate 65 and filleted them for their restaurant customers. Lewis noticed that fish in general was becoming more popular and prevalent on restaurant menus.

He thought that they should increase the seafood selection they offered clients.

Through much trial and error, and a weeklong Seattle seafood school, he has learned how to smoke fish. "It has not always been a smooth ride," said his wife, Vicki, who works at the company.

He smoked the salmon that his customers were asking for and experimented with every other kind of fish he could. He recalls opening the door of the smoker to find whitefish



Shuckman inspected trout. His smoked paddlefish with paddlefish caviar and garnished with a sweet/sour plum sauce is a favorite offering by chef Jim Gerhardt at the Seelbach Hilton Hotel's Oak Room.

Photo by Michael Clevenger

Smoked fish looks elegant, tastes great

When you have access to smoked fish, sometimes the best way to treat it is to follow chef Jim Gerhardt's lead: slice it and serve it. Once in a while, though, you might want to use it in a recipe. Smoked fish always seems elegant and delicious, no matter how you serve it.

Smoked trout dip

8 ounces cream cheese, softened
1/2 cup sour cream, more or less
8 ounces (or so) smoked trout, skinned if necessary and flaked
2 green onions, trimmed and minced
1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper

Beat cream cheese until no lumps remain. Beat in sour cream until smooth. Add remaining ingredients and stir. Serve with crackers. Add a teaspoon or so of horseradish, if desired.

Makes 2 cups.

broken and strewn about. "They were everywhere," he said. The fish he used were too heavy and, as they became tender during smoking, they broke and dropped. "That didn't go over too well with the board of directors," he said, recalling his father's reaction.

Shuckman was also working with aquaculture experts at Kentucky State University and the state Agriculture Department, acquiring fish, smoking fish and giving it to anyone who would take a sample, trying to prove that his product was good and the smoked-fish business was viable. He has constantly met with skepticism; there have been a lot of setbacks.

"Perseverance is an admirable quality of Lewis'," Vicki Shuckman said. "He is also a very optimistic person."

State agriculture officials encouraged him. "He's an end-user," Caporelli said. "He's a very important part of the cycle."

Translation: He buys fish, allowing farmers to make a living.

So Shuckman was in pole position when chef Jim Gerhardt came to Louisville seven years ago looking to change the menu at the Seelbach Hilton Hotel's historic Oak Room from nonspecific "continental cuisine" to "Kentucky fine dining."

"Lewis was one of the first fish vendors that called on us," Gerhardt said. "He was open to adjusting his techniques, and that's pretty exciting when you're rolling out a new menu."

Gerhardt serves all of Shuckman's Kentucky products, including fresh caviar. Right now, he's featuring a trio of smoked paddlefish, trout and catfish as an appetizer. The fish is "hot" smoked, which makes the meat opaque and flaky, rather than cold smoked, which leaves the meat silky and translucent.

Since those early days with Gerhardt, Shuckman has received a national award for the quality of his smoked paddlefish, has added a "Woodford Reserve" product that is marinated in the

Smoked trout and grapefruit salad

Grapefruit with smoked trout is a popular combination that makes a delicious salad, especially in late winter and early spring. This recipe is adapted from one in "Bay Wolf Restaurant Cookbook" (Ten Speed Press, 2001).

5 grapefruit
3 tablespoons sugar
1/2 cup olive oil
3/4 cup sour cream
Freshly squeezed lemon juice
Salt and (freshly ground) black pepper to taste
2 pinches fresh, minced tarragon
4 thin slices good-quality bread
1 tablespoon melted butter
1 head Belgian endive, julienned
4 small handfuls various lettuces
4 halves smoked trout

Finely chop the zest (colored part of peel) of 3 grapefruits, then juice them. Mix the zest and juice in a small saucepan with sugar. Place over medium-high heat; reduce the liquid to 2 tablespoons. Transfer to a bowl and cool. Whisk in oil and 3 tablespoons sour cream. Season to taste with lemon juice, salt and pepper and tarragon. If the dressing tastes too acidic, add more olive oil.

Peel the remaining 2 grapefruits and section them. Cut each bread slice into 3 triangles, brush with melted butter and toast in the oven to make croutons. Toss the grapefruit sections, endive and various lettuces in some of the dressing. Arrange on plates.

Remove the skin of the trout if necessary.

Top each salad with 3 croutons, a spoonful of sour cream and some of the trout.

Serves 4.

bourbon and smoked with wood from Woodford barrels and has seen his caviar featured on the TV show "Emeril Live" and compared favorably to Osetra caviar in tastings by experts.

Napa Valley-based chef Peter Halikas uses Shuckman's trout and caviar in the food he prepares as executive chef at fine-food emporium Dean & DeLuca. "People in California are really conscious of what they eat," he said. "They want high-end ingredients, but they don't want to eat endangered species."

Because Shuckman has been successful selling the fish, and because he pays a premium to fish growers, he was awarded \$300,000 from the Agricultural Development Fund, which was set up to disperse tobacco settlement money. Shuckman matched the grant — the second-largest award given to an individual business — and used the money to modernize his plant. He said the modernization will allow him to quadruple the current production of 700 pounds of fish per week.

Meat and groceries are no longer part of his inventory.

He appears as excited about his state-of-the-art vacuum packager as anyone else might be about a first-born child. That's just Lewis.

Many of his smoked-fish products are sold at Doll's Market, 3620 Brownsboro Road (897-1501) ; Old Town Liquors, 1529 Bardstown Road, (451-8591) ; Lotsa Pasta, 3717 Lexington Rd., 896-6361; Liquor Barn, 1800 S. Hurstbourne Pkwy, 491-0753 and 4301 Towne Center, 426-4222; Party Mart: 4808 Brownsboro Road 895-4446; St. Matthews Seafood, 3729 Lexington Ave., 895-0167; and Taste of Kentucky, Village Square Shopping Center, 244-3355, and Mall St. Matthews, 895-2733.

For more information, call Shuckman's Fish Co. and Smokery at 775-6478 or go to the Web site www.kysmokedfish.com.

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